



National Bible Week

Tips for Using Scripture in Catechesis and Prayer

Have you ever had this happen to you? The priest or lector begins to proclaim a Scripture reading at Mass, and you recognize it immediately. Oh, that’s the one about Abraham and Isaac, or about the wise and foolish virgins, you think. Before you know it, you are lost in a labyrinth of random associations and other thoughts, so much so that when the lector intones, “The Word of the Lord,” you come out of your thoughts and realize that you haven’t really heard the reading just proclaimed.

Such a scenario shows the reality of how we process information: it is normal for a word or phrase to conjure up memories. A familiar story draws us into a stream of consciousness that may easily float us far from the original incident. Fortunately, the genius of the Catholic liturgy is that it does not rely solely on the spoken word. Since long before psychologist Howard Gardner formulated his theory of multiple intelligences,¹ the liturgy has utilized many different means to bring the community together in prayer and engage it in meaningful worship: processions and songs, candle flames and incense, bread and wine, stained glass and architecture, sharing the sign of peace and participating in ritual responses, as well as proclaiming and listening.

In the same way, there are multiple ways in which Scripture can be made an integral part of both worship and catechesis. Here are a few for you to consider.

Dramatization

One way to make the Scriptures come alive for people, especially for children, is to act them out. These dramatizations can be well planned or improvised on the spot. They can be acted out effectively by children as young as six, as well as by adults. Dramatization is an instructional method that can be used frequently, engages lots of people, and uses many of the senses in the learning process. (Of course, such dramatizations should never take the place of the proclamation of the Scriptures or the homily at Mass.)

• Bringing Scripture to life can be done as a family activity. If you want to limit the actors to children, involve the parents in developing the script, making costumes, and organizing rehearsals, as well as planning the reception following the presentation. Don’t be afraid to encourage the parents to take on acting roles, especially those against type—let the parent be the prodigal son, a child the forgiving parent.

• While you can do small-scale dramatizations at any time, certain times of the year lend themselves well to acting out the Scriptures. The Advent/Christmas and the Lent/Easter seasons are obvious times, but you can also let the lectionary determine your readings. Think of stories that can be easily acted out, again like Luke 15:11-32, the parable of the prodigal son.

• Here’s one way to act out this parable. Have a parent read the passage aloud, as if slowly telling a story. Have someone, parent or child, act out the son’s behavior as the passage is read. Have an actor playing the role of the father wait patiently for the son’s return and then celebrate with glee when the son comes home. Use balloons to indicate the party atmosphere. Involve many other actors to play the incidental roles that occur in the story. Be sure to incorporate music to help convey the story’s message.

• Following the dramatization, encourage participants to engage in both personal and small-group reflection. Provide questions for families to use for this discussion on site, and include a few questions that families can use for discussion following the event.

• You can use this approach in assemblies and classes, and even during meetings. Make copies of the readings, highlight individual parts, and randomly distribute them. Only a short explanation is needed, but be ready to fill in if someone balks. The next time, they’ll know what to expect.

¹ The eight intelligences we possess are linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist (see Gardner’s *Frames of Mind: A Theory of Multiple Intelligences* [10th anniversary ed.] [New York: Basic Books, 1993]).

Praying with Scripture

While some people will pray with Scripture in what is sometimes called the “roulette wheel” fashion—opening the Bible at random and taking as divine communication whatever phrase their finger lands on—this practice is not as common in the Catholic tradition.

One form of Scriptural prayer that is an important part of Catholic tradition is the practice of *Lectio Divina*, which dates back to the early days of monastic life (fourth or fifth century). Using a reflective process to read the Scriptures, *Lectio Divina* is a very effective way to pray with the daily readings² or those read at Sunday Mass.

The *Lectio Divina* process is very easy to introduce to individuals and groups, large or small. There are many variations on the process, but here is one that can be used with ease in a larger group setting.

- Have each person bring a Bible and notebook to the session. Have extra Bibles and notebooks available for those who forget.
- Start by asking the participants to quiet themselves in mind and spirit.
- Explain that you will be reading a Scripture passage aloud several times, and invite participants to follow along with you in their own Bibles.
- The first time through, they are to listen for a word or phrase that catches their attention. They might jot it down for later reflection.
- Before reading the passage aloud the second time, ask participants to consider what meaning this passage has for their own lives.
- Before reading the passage a third time, ask participants to ponder what their response to God’s word might be.
- Allow time following each reading for participants to reflect on the Scripture passage and to pray with it. They can use their notebooks to write down thoughts, impressions, images, and ideas that come to mind from the reading.
- Finally, after an appropriate length of time has passed, ask if any participants want to share aloud their thoughts and prayers from this experience.

² Daily readings are available online at www.usccb.org/nab.

Imagination

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola provide a lively example of how to use imagination to enter into the Scriptures. The variation suggested here combines both dramatization and prayer. This approach works best with narrative or story forms of Scripture, such as the Gospels and much of the Old Testament. It can also be used by individuals or as a group.

Start with a prayerful reading of the story. Then take on for yourself the mantle of one of the characters in the narrative; attempt to enter into that role during a subsequent reading. What does it mean to be this person? What do you see, hear, smell, feel, and think? Are you free or restrained in some way? What happens to you, and why? Stay with that experience in prayer, and write in your journal about it. How does this experience reflect something in your own life? Where can God’s will be found here? How are you being called to respond?

This exercise can be used with all age groups. In particular, elementary-school-aged children are marvelously adept in this kind of exercise, and their responses are often profound.

In summation, whether in prayer or catechesis, allow the Scriptures to breathe for you and your parishioners. Rather than allowing them to remain ancient words on a page, ignite them within your imagination, and invite them into your lives where they can become vital and relevant to daily prayer. Peace and blessings in your ministry!